



**RE-ENGAGING
STUDENT PARENTS
TO ACHIEVE
ATTAINMENT AND
EQUITY GOALS**

**A Case for
Investment in
More Accessible
Postsecondary
Pathways**

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

In recent years, the goal of 60 percent of adults holding a postsecondary degree has been set as a key benchmark for the United States to build a skilled workforce and remain economically competitive. Engaging adults with some college credit but no degree is critical to reaching this goal. Efforts to increase adult degree attainment, however, have largely ignored the role of parenthood in adults' ability to reengage with and complete college. This report builds on past IWPR research exploring the experiences and support needs of student parents, including those who have taken prolonged enrollment breaks, and the policy and practice reforms needed to improve their ability to thrive in and graduate from college. Using data from the American Community Survey, the report sheds light on gaps in educational attainment rates among parents by gender, marital status, and race and ethnicity. It then projects future attainment rates to highlight the integral role parents play in reaching a 60-percent attainment target nationally. The report also demonstrates how gaps in degree attainment by race and ethnicity may persist in the absence of more targeted support for adult learners who are parents of children under 18. This research was generously supported by Imaginable Futures.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Filling in-demand jobs, which increasingly require postsecondary training, is essential to helping the United States remain economically competitive. Improving rates of attainment of associate, bachelor's, and graduate degrees among U.S. adults, therefore, stands as a key benchmark for meeting these growing labor demands.¹ As of 2020, 45 states have set a target goal for educational attainment, with many focused on reaching the point at which 60 percent of their residents hold a degree or certificate.² Many efforts to improve attainment rates have focused on engaging adult learners—especially those who have earned some college credit, but do not hold a degree—in postsecondary programs, knowing that reaching necessary levels of degree attainment will require more than just the population of graduating high school students.³

Those efforts, however, have largely ignored the sizable population of parents who started, but have not completed, a degree program. More than a third (35 percent) of adults with some college credit but no degree are parents of children under 18. Little research has acknowledged parents as distinct from adults without children, or the ways in which supporting their college enrollment and completion may help reduce racial and ethnic gaps in degree attainment.⁴ Given that earning a college degree has become increasingly imperative to securing quality, living-wage employment, ensuring that all adults have accessible opportunities to earn a degree—including those with children and those who face the greatest structural barriers—is essential for family wellbeing, racial equity, and broader social and economic progress.

Using data from the American Community Survey, this report describes educational attainment among adults with and without children under 18 living in their households, with a specific focus on parents with some college credit but no degree. The analysis highlights gaps in degree attainment among parents by gender, marital status, and race and ethnicity. The report then provides estimates of future attainment rates among parents with some college credit but no degree to highlight the integral role they play in meeting market demands for college-educated workers. They also underscore the ways in which attainment gaps by race and ethnicity may persist in the absence of more targeted support for parents, particularly single parents. The report concludes with recommendations for how federal and state policymakers, as well as institutions, must work to rectify structural gaps in access to educational opportunity and build supportive pathways to degree attainment for parents who face the greatest structural barriers to equity.

Key Findings

Why Returning Parents Matter for Reaching Postsecondary Attainment and Equity Goals

- The benefits of holding a college degree are amplified for single mothers and for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous parents, who are less likely to have higher levels of education compared with other adults and generally face greater economic insecurity. For these parents, the intersecting obstacles faced as result of being parents from marginalized racial backgrounds create steeper barriers to college-going than for non-parenting adults and parents of other racial/ethnic groups.
- Providing greater support for parents seeking to complete their college education would represent a means of gaining additional momentum towards reaching educational attainment goals and closing racial and ethnic equity gaps in degree attainment. In addition, as the country seeks to recover from a global pandemic and economic recession that have disproportionately affected Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities, enabling the population of parents in need of postsecondary credentials from these communities to earn college degrees is essential to an equitable recovery.

Educational Attainment among Adults and Parents

- As of 2019, roughly 43 percent of all adults—or 73.7 million people—had completed associate, bachelor's, and graduate degrees; an additional 28.7 million adults would need to earn an associate degree or higher to reach 60 percent attainment among U.S. adults.
- Parents overall are more likely to hold college degrees than adults without children (47 percent compared with 41 percent). Mothers are more likely than fathers to have earned a degree (49 percent compared with 45 percent).
- Single parents and Latinx, Indigenous, and Black parents are the least likely adults to hold a college degree, underscoring the fact that, despite a desire to earn a college education, these parents face structural obstacles that can derail their educational goals.

The Characteristics of Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree

- One in five adults ages 25 to 64 (34.8 million people) holds some college credit but no degree—more than a third of whom (35 percent) are parents of at least one child under age 18 living in their household. More than two in five of these parents (5.2 million people) have children under the age of six.

- Single parents are more likely to hold some college credit but no degree than married parents and adults without children under 18 (26 percent compared with 18 percent and 21 percent, respectively).
- Latinx parents are the least likely to hold college degrees (23 percent) while also among the least likely to have earned some college credit but no degree (18 percent). Combined, this accounts for more than two in five (42 percent) of all Latinx parents, suggesting a relatively greater likelihood of completion among Latinx parents if a degree program is started, but also that a substantial set of obstacles exist to their accessing a degree program in the first place.
- Black and Indigenous parents are the most likely to have earned some college credit but no degree compared with parents of other racial/ethnic backgrounds. This trend is pronounced among Black and Indigenous mothers, who are more likely than their male counterparts and other men and women to have started, but not completed, postsecondary educational programs.
- Slightly fewer than one in three parents with some college credit but no degree overall (31 percent) are single parents and most of these single parents (72 percent) are single mothers. Black and Indigenous parents with some college credit but no degree are more likely to be single than other parents with the same level of education. These trends have important implications for the support interventions needed to promote greater educational access and success among parents and adults overall with some college credit.

The Effect of Parental Degree Completion on National Attainment Goals

- IWPR's analysis finds that it is very unlikely that the country will reach its goal attainment rate without taking steps to promote reengagement and completion among parents with some college credit but no degree. Even if the few adults who report recent enrollment in a college program (roughly 2.8 million people, including parents) and all adults without children who hold at least one year of college credit—but no degree—go on to graduate, the United States still would not achieve 60 percent attainment among adults overall.
- At the present trajectory, it will take until 2042 to reach 60 percent degree attainment among all adults aged 25 to 64. Parents will reach 60 percent attainment faster than their counterparts without children (2034 compared with 2049, respectively). Mothers overall will reach 60 percent attainment in 2030, compared with fathers in 2038 and single mothers in 2048.

Recommendations

Federal and state policymakers and institutional leaders must take meaningful action to reengage and support success in college for adult learners who are parents. This action must pay special attention to addressing equity gaps for single parents and for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx parents. To successfully eliminate existing disparities in attainment among parents who hold some college credit but no degree—and for those who are Black, Indigenous, and Latinx, in particular—powerholders must enact evidence-based policy and practices to dismantle structural racism and create equal opportunities for underrepresented students to access the postsecondary system.

For federal policymakers, this includes:

- Reestablishing a national attainment goal that includes student parents as a priority population and specific racial and ethnic equity targets, alongside an explicit policy agenda—and adequate public investment—that aims to facilitate progress for parents, single parents, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous adults who do not currently hold college credentials;
- Facilitating the collection and reporting of data from states and institutions on the number, characteristics, and outcomes of students who are parents; and
- Increasing investment in critical student parent infrastructure, as well as broadly accessible and affordable child care for families.

For state and institutional leaders, this includes:

- Adding attainment goals for students who are parents that acknowledge the intersection of parenting and racial and ethnic equity in attainment;
- Prioritizing a policy agenda that will facilitate progress for returning single parents and student parents of color;
- Implementing evidence-based practices and policies that promote attainment among parenting students, especially Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and single parents;
- Initiating system- and campus-level data collection and reporting mechanisms focused on students who are parents; and
- Developing and implementing campus-level strategies that intentionally reengage parents with prior credits and provide supportive, family-friendly pathways to degree attainment.

INTRODUCTION

Educational stakeholders and policymakers across the United States are committed to increasing postsecondary attainment among U.S. adults to meet growing demands for a highly educated workforce.⁵ At least 45 states have set targeted goals for college attainment, in many cases aiming for at least 60 percent of adult residents ages 25 to 64 to have completed a postsecondary credential by dates ranging from 2025 to 2030. College completion rates among adults, however, have improved only minimally since 2009.⁶ Declining enrollment, especially at community colleges, due to educational pauses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this slow rate of progress, making understanding how to support adult learners even more critical in reaching postsecondary attainment goals.⁷

Efforts to understand how to facilitate attainment among adult learners, including how to reengage adults who have earned some college credit but who have yet to finish a degree, have increased in recent years to try and accelerate the country's pace toward reaching the 60 percent benchmark.⁸ To date, much of this work has focused on the 34.8 million adults who have some college credit but no degree, with some attention paid to racial equity and attainment gaps.⁹ Past research has shown that parent status frequently intersects with additional marginalized identities to affect the experience and outcomes of students pursuing postsecondary education, and a little more than one third of U.S. adults who started college but have yet to complete an associate degree or higher (35 percent, or 12.2 million) also have children under 18.¹⁰ Yet only limited research has examined how effectively reengaging prospective adult learners who are parents matters for promoting postsecondary degree attainment.¹¹

Parenthood is essential to consider in efforts to promote college success among adults. College students with children, or student parents, face a range of obstacles to college completion that result in relatively poorer outcomes than among students who do not have children.¹² These obstacles stem from significant economic insecurity, caregiving demands, and a lack of adequate supports on campuses and in communities, such as affordable childcare or family housing. Such impediments to educational progress are even more pronounced for parents impacted by systemic racial injustice.¹³ Given the concentrated surge in unemployment among adults who do not hold post-high school credentials during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 health and economic crises experienced by parents, women, and low-income and marginalized households, effectively promoting pathways to degree attainment for parents who desire it is essential to promoting family economic stability—in addition to helping the country meet its attainment and economic goals.¹⁴

Promoting pathways to degree attainment for parents who desire it is essential—for promoting economic stability and growth among families and the U.S. more broadly.

This report first provides an overview of past national and existing state attainment goals and a discussion of the importance of considering parents who started, but have not completed, a college degree in meeting these goals. Using data from the American Community Survey (ACS), it then describes the demographic characteristics of parents with some college credit but no degree to highlight the composition of this key group of individuals and to better understand disparities in attainment by race and ethnicity. It examines the potential for parents to help achieve a national postsecondary attainment rate of 60 percent and to reduce racial equity gaps in degree attainment. It then shares estimates of future postsecondary attainment rates based on recent trends (2014 to 2018) to identify gaps in attainment progress among parents by race/ethnicity and marital status and their need for more targeted support. Finally, the report concludes with recommended actions for federal and state policymakers as well as institutions to support prospective student parents' reengagement with college and completion of postsecondary degrees.

Overview of State and National Attainment Goals

Two major initiatives have shaped the educational attainment agenda over the last decade. In pursuit of a "stronger nation," the Lumina Foundation introduced its 60 percent postsecondary attainment goal in 2008.¹⁵ This goal focuses on adults ranging from ages 25 to 64 earning quality post-high school credentials, including college degrees and high-quality non-degree credentials, by 2025. The Foundation defines these high-quality certifications as those which are awarded by industry or professional groups and are designed to signal valued skills and competencies that translate into relative labor market gains.¹⁶

In response to the nation's rapidly changing workforce needs, the Obama administration also set a national goal for college completion in 2009, developing a strategic aim of reaching a 60 percent postsecondary degree attainment rate among adults from 25 to 34 years old by the year 2020.¹⁷ While currently there is no official attainment goal from the Biden administration or the U.S. Department of Education, there is substantial focus on strengthening college as a reliable pathway to the middle class.¹⁸

The establishment of these two national goals noticeably influenced state-level actors and the corresponding development of state-level attainment goals.¹⁹ As of 2020, 45 states had set some sort of postsecondary education attainment goal.²⁰ Twenty-one states share the target goal of 60 percent postsecondary attainment by 2025, with another 20 states setting their attainment goals over 60 percent and four setting goals lower than 60 percent. Most states (34) have focused their goals on a target population of people ages 25 to 64, often referred to as the "adult population" or "working age adults," although some states (nine) focus on a younger subset of adults ages 25 to 34. All told, roughly half of all states (26) have set target attainment rates of 60 percent or more by 2025 for adults aged 25 or older. Five of these states only count associate and bachelor's degrees in their definition of postsecondary education attainment, while 40 also include non-degree certificates or licenses.²¹

Existing research highlights the gradual advancements in progress toward certificate and degree completion across states and nationwide. According to the most recent available estimates provided by the Lumina Foundation's progress tracking tool, the national average post-high school attainment rate increased from approximately 38 percent in 2008 to 52 percent in 2019.²² However, this estimate includes short-term credentials, certificates, and certifications; by Lumina's estimates, only about 44 percent of U.S. residents ages 25 to 64 have associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and graduate or professional degrees as of 2019. Other estimates of degree attainment in the United States vary slightly given their different underlying methodologies; for instance, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates suggest roughly 48 percent of U.S. adults hold degrees as of 2019.²³ Though attainment has increased across all racial and ethnic categories, progress toward broader goals is mainly attributed to attainment among Asian and Pacific Islander and White adults, with less advancement demonstrated by Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations.²⁴

The nation fell short of achieving Obama's 2020 goal. Even by its own estimates, the Lumina Foundation's 60 percent goal will not be reached by 2025.²⁵ Several reports from higher education policy researchers suggest that aggressive and targeted actions are needed to achieve attainment goals across all demographic backgrounds and address existing disparities among racial, ethnic, income level, and immigration status.²⁶ A focus on adult learning is also essential, and literature suggests that increasing college-going and attainment among adult subpopulations, specifically the population of adults holding some college credit but no degree, is necessary to achieving postsecondary attainment goals at the national and state levels.²⁷

Why Returning Parents Matter for Reaching Degree Attainment and Equity Goals

Adult learners are critical to achieving a goal of 60 percent degree attainment for the United States. Existing literature has highlighted how simply increasing high school graduates' college enrollment and graduation rates is insufficient to reach most state-level attainment goals.²⁸ In addition to supporting adult learners overall, providing greater support for parents in need of college credentials to reengage with their college education—such as enhanced access to affordable child care, financial assistance, and basic needs support—would be a means of gaining additional progress toward reaching greater national and state attainment rates and goals related to closing racial and ethnic gaps in postsecondary attainment.

Earning a college degree or credential has become increasingly imperative to economic stability and progress, affording benefits to families and society at large. Prior evidence published by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) demonstrates the economic benefits of postsecondary attainment among the single mother population: single mothers' attainment of college degrees leads to increased lifetime earnings, reducing poverty, and stimulating returns to the economy in the form of tax contributions and a savings in spending on public assistance.²⁹

For parents of color, particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous single mothers, the intersecting obstacles they face as parents from marginalized racial backgrounds create roadblocks to college access and completion.

Black, Latinx, and Indigenous single mothers have much to gain and contribute to economic advancement from successful college attainment, yet they show the most disparate outcomes in terms of attainment projections. The attainment gaps seen among parents of color—particularly Black, Latinx, and Indigenous single mothers—are aligned with the racial and ethnic attainment gaps in the general population. But, for many, the intersecting obstacles they face as parents from marginalized racial backgrounds create steeper roadblocks to college-going than for non-parenting adults and parents of other racial/ethnic groups. The gendered nature of the current economic recession and rate of job loss among women of color adds an additional layer of complexity.³⁰

In addition to the economic gains associated with college completion, increasing postsecondary attainment among parents could have immediate positive effects on their children's academic success and likelihood that they go on to college themselves. Past research has shown that children of college-educated mothers are much more likely to excel in primary school and enroll in college than those whose mothers did not complete degrees.³¹ Creating a positive feedback loop in this way could further help to reduce gaps in attainment observed among parents of color.

National and state policymakers, educational leaders, employers, and other stakeholders share in the responsibility of developing an educated workforce to meet pressing economic demands and to build a society in which all families can thrive. That responsibility, therefore, must include supporting parents who desire to complete a college education, to ensure they have the tools needed to establish economic security for themselves and their children. In addition, as the country seeks to recover from a global pandemic and economic recession that have disproportionately affected communities of color—specifically Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities—enabling parents in need of college credentials to reengage and earn a degree is both essential to national attainment goals and to goals of equitable recovery.

Data and Methods

The remainder of this report presents descriptive analysis characterizing parents with some college credit but no degree and their role in achieving a 60 percent degree attainment goal for U.S. adults. It also draws on past IWPR research and other relevant literature to place its findings around parental attainment rates and disparate racial, gender, and family structure-based outcomes (e.g., marital status) in the larger structural and policy contexts which have direct bearing on parents' access to, and success in, higher education.

Data Source

To describe the population of adults who are parents of dependent children and who started college but did not complete with a degree, IWPR analyzed data from the American Community Survey (ACS). IWPR's descriptive analysis draws from data pooled from the three most recent single year data files (2017, 2018, and 2019), as well as the five most recent five-year data files (2014 through 2019).³² Unless otherwise noted, data presented in the text are based on IWPR's analysis of the ACS data.

All analysis is focused on adults aged 25 to 64, in keeping with the age range targeted by most national and state goals.³³ Since no additional specification is given for any non-degree certificates or credentials earned in the ACS data, this analysis focuses solely on degree attainment and progress towards increasing these attainment rates; non-degree credentials and licenses are not included. Racial and ethnic categories are based on ACS response classifications and aggregate subpopulations to be able to comment on national-level patterns and trends. For a detailed discussion of methods and limitations of the data and descriptive analysis, see Appendix A; for a discussion of methods for the degree attainment projections, see Appendix C.

Terminology

For the purposes of the analysis in this report, "parents" refers to adults who report having at least one child of their own under age 18 residing in their household at the time of the survey.³⁴ Existing analysis of postsecondary data demonstrate that college students with children take longer on average to complete degrees and are less likely to graduate than their counterparts without children.³⁵ In addition, adults with some college credit who were not parents while enrolled, but who now have children under 18, can face obstacles to their ability to reenroll to complete a postsecondary credential.³⁶

"Adults without children" refers to adults without children of their own under age 18 residing in their household. These adults may have never had children of their own, have children who reside in a separate household, or have children aged 18 or older living in or out of their household.

Postsecondary degree holders include adults ages 25 to 64 who have earned associate, bachelor's, graduate, or professional degrees. Adults who report having earned some college credit but no degree are counted as distinct from these degree holders as well as from those with a high school diploma or its equivalent as their highest level of education.

Given the cross-sectional nature of the ACS data, it is impossible to tell when an individual had a child relative to being enrolled (or discontinuing enrollment) in a degree program, when exactly an individual started or stopped their enrollment in a degree program, or the number of credits taken during a specified period. "Parents with some college credit but no degree" therefore includes people who had children when they started college and/or while they

were enrolled, but who paused their enrollment before graduating with a degree, in addition to those who had children after their initial postsecondary experience (i.e., they were not parents while enrolled previously).

I. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AMONG ADULTS AND PARENTS

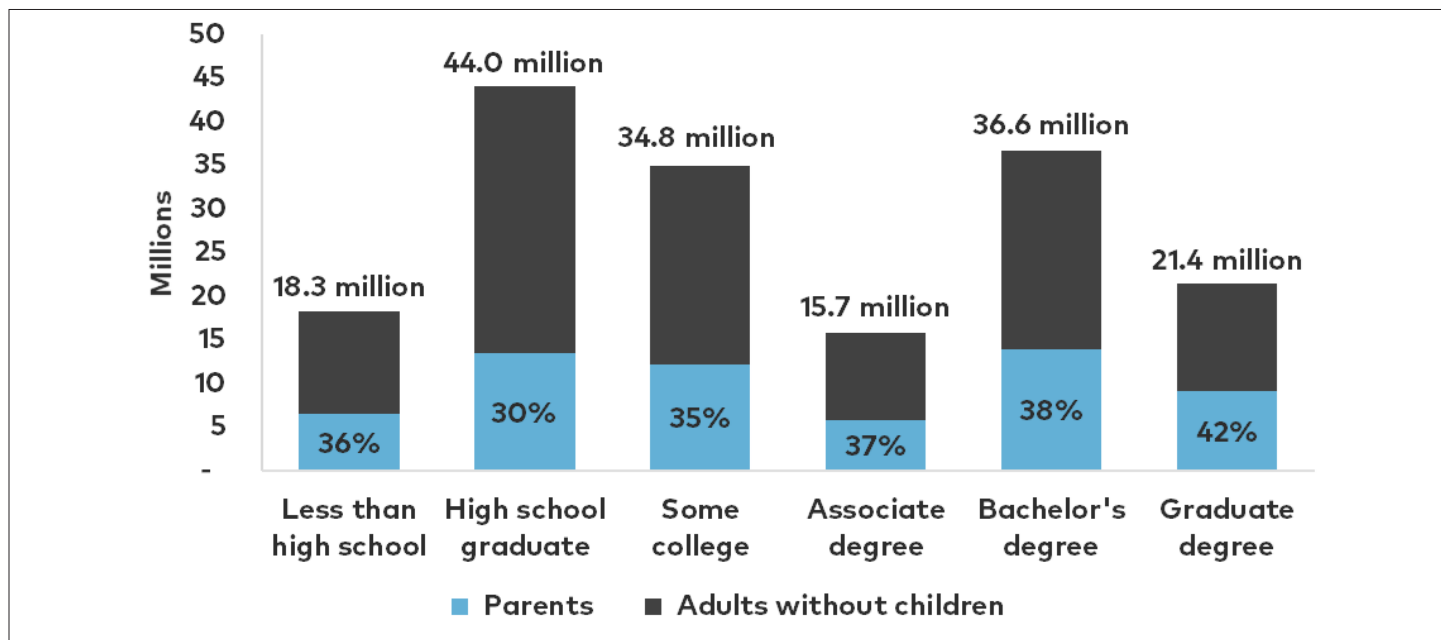
As of 2019, roughly 43 percent of all adults ages 25 to 64—or 73.7 million people—had completed some type of postsecondary degree, including associate, bachelor's, and graduate degrees. To reach a degree attainment rate of 60 percent nationally (or 102.4 million people) among adults in that age range, an additional 28.7 million adults would need to earn an associate degree or higher based on a total estimated population of 170.7 million U.S. adults ages 25 to 64.

Another one in five adults ages 25 to 64 (20 percent or 34.8 million people) had earned some college credit but no degree, more than a third of whom (35 percent or 12.2 million adults) are parents of at least one child under age 18 living in their household (Figure 1; see Table B1 for number of adults by educational attainment and share who are parents disaggregated by race/ethnicity). This is in keeping with broader demographic trends: 36 percent of all adults aged 25 to 64 (60.8 million adults) are parents living with at least one child under age 18. Of these parents with some college credit but no degree, 42 percent (5.2 million adults) have young children under age six, and 56 percent (6.8 million parents) are mothers.

Roughly 20 percent of adults ages 25 to 64 (34.8 million people) have earned some college credit but no degree—more than a third of whom (12.2 million) are parents of at least one child under age 18 living in their household.

FIGURE 1. Over One-Third of Adults Ages 25–64 Who Have Earned Some College Credit but Do Not Hold a Degree—or 12.2 Million People—Are Parents

Number of Adults Aged 25–64 by Educational Attainment and Share Who are Parents of Children Under 18, 2017–2019



Notes: "Parents" refers to those who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. "Adults without children" refers to adults without children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. See Table B1 for number of adults by educational attainment and share who are parents disaggregated by race/ethnicity.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

Parents, on average, are more likely to hold college degrees than their counterparts without children (47 percent compared with 41 percent). This trend may, in part, reflect the fact that parents tend to be younger than adults without children, coupled with the growing rate of degree attainment immediately following high school observed in recent years.³⁷

Patterns of parental degree attainment by gender follow those among adults overall, where in recent years women generally have been observed to enroll and complete college at a higher rate than men.³⁸ Mothers are more likely than fathers to have earned a college degree (49 percent compared with 45 percent), and the most likely to have earned an associate, bachelor's, or graduate degree compared with women overall (47 percent) and women who are not mothers of children under 18 in the household (45 percent).

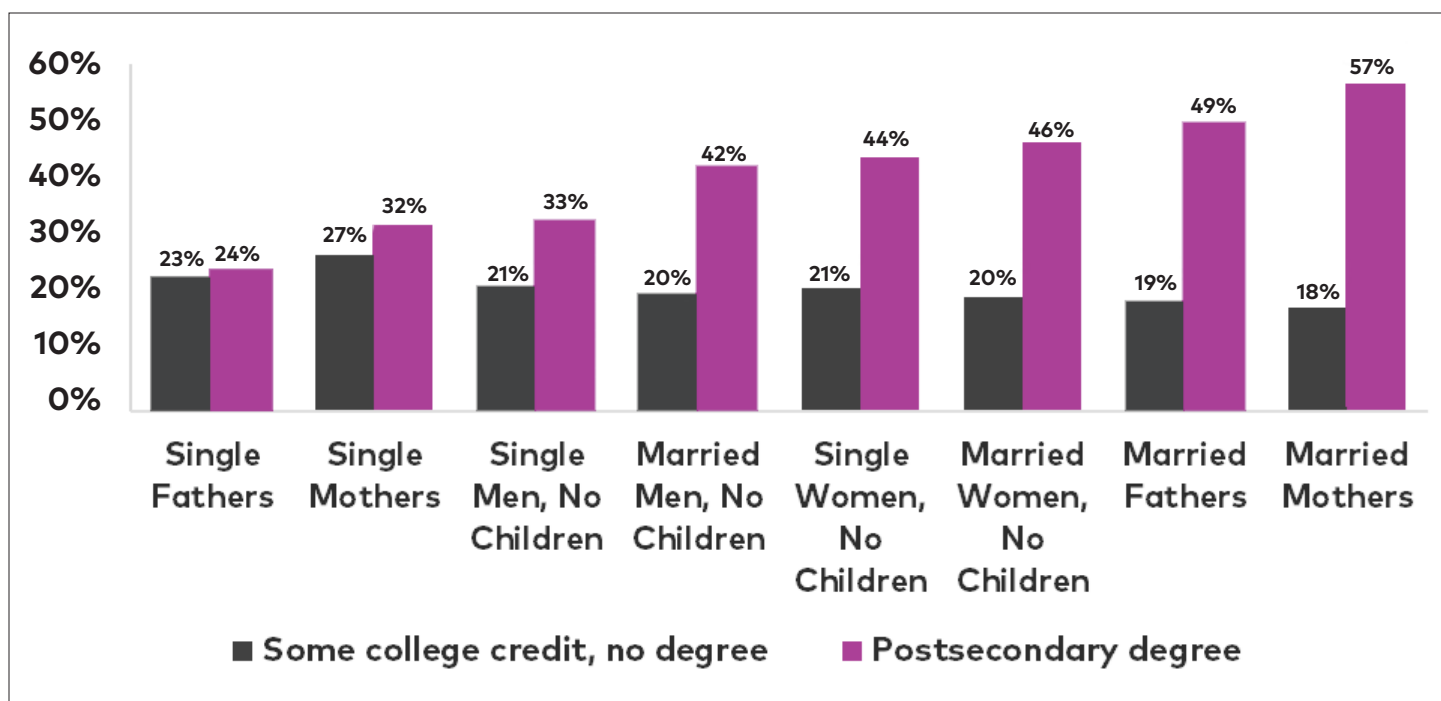
Single Parents Are Associated with Markedly Lower Degree Attainment Rates than Other Adults

When looking at rates of degree attainment among parents compared with their counterparts without children under 18, single parents are the least likely adults to hold a college degree—less than one in three (30 percent) single parents hold an associate degree or higher compared with over half (53 percent) of married parents and 41 percent of adults without children under 18. Single parents also are the most likely to have started but not completed a degree (26 percent) compared with married parents (18 percent) and adults without children under 18 (21 percent). In alignment with existing research on the experiences of single parents in college and the lack of support for their needs, these data underscore that, despite a desire for a degree and earning some credit toward it, single parents persistently face obstacles to college enrollment and persistence than can derail their educational goals.³⁹

FIGURE 2. Single Parents Are Least Likely to Hold College Degrees, and Most Likely to Have Some College Credit but No Degree

Compared with Married and Single Adults with and without Children

Share of Adults by Marital Status, Gender, and Parent Status Who Hold Some College Credit or College Degrees, 2017–2019



Notes: "Single" includes those who responded as either separated, widowed, divorced, or never married. "Married" includes only those who responded as being married at the time of the survey. "Fathers" and "mothers" refer to men and women who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. "Parents" overall refers to adults with at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household regardless of marital status or gender; adults without children do not have children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. "College degrees" is inclusive of associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and graduate or professional degrees.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

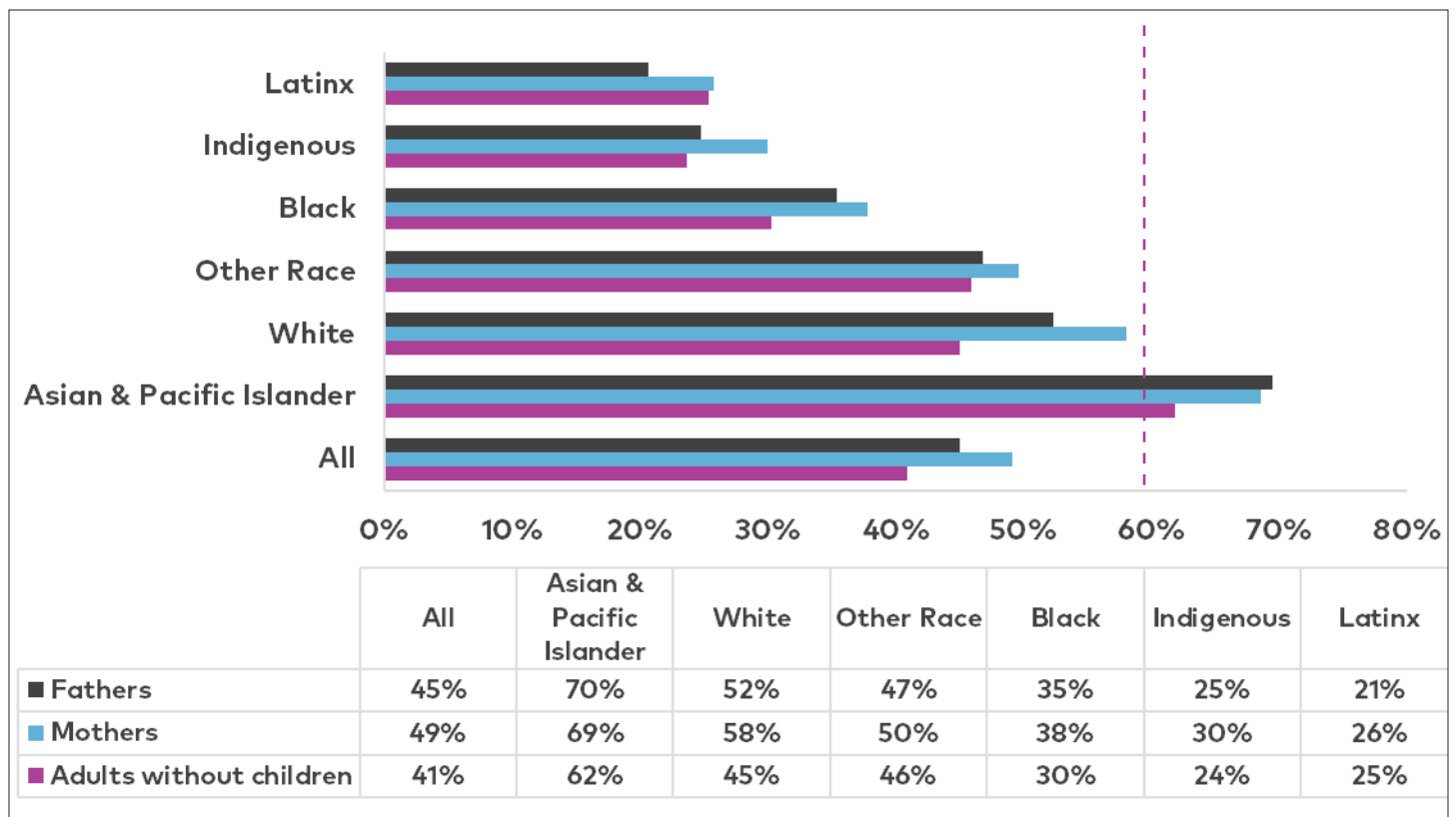
Prominent Racial and Ethnic Gaps Exist in Attainment Rates Among Parenting Adults

Even though parents on average are more likely to have earned a degree than their adult counterparts of the same race/ethnicity without children, prominent racial and ethnic gaps exist in attainment rates among parenting adults (Figure 3).⁴⁰ Only 23 percent of Latinx, 28 percent of Indigenous, and 37 percent of Black parents hold postsecondary degrees. Half (55 percent) of all White parents have earned a degree, meaning they are very near to reaching the 60 percent attainment goal, and Asian and Pacific Islander parents overall have surpassed it: roughly 70 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander mothers and fathers hold at least an associate degree. It is important to note, however, that these overarching trends do not necessarily reflect all subpopulations within these groups (see Appendix A).

FIGURE 3. Latinx, Indigenous, and Black Parents Are Least Likely to Hold Postsecondary Degrees

Compared with Parents of Other Races and Ethnicities

Share of Adults Aged 25–64 with Postsecondary Degrees by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Parental Status, 2017–2019



Note: "Fathers" and "mothers" refer to men and women who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. "Adults without children" refer to adults without children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. Postsecondary degrees include associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and graduate degrees. Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A. When combined with other educational attainment levels, totals may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

Taking into account marital status in conjunction with race/ethnicity underscores attainment gaps among U.S. parents more broadly. White and Asian and Pacific Islander married mothers and fathers have exceeded the 60 percent benchmark as of the most recent data. In comparison, for example, just 29 percent of Latina married mothers and 20 percent of Latina single mothers have earned a degree, leaving a 30-40 percentage point gap before they reach 60 percent attainment (Table B2).

II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTS WITH SOME COLLEGE CREDIT BUT NO DEGREE

Understanding the characteristics of parents who hold some college credit, but no degree, is essential to understanding their postsecondary experiences and designing interventions to promote their reengagement with college and attainment of degrees. Among the 12.2 million parents who hold some college credit but no degree, 56 percent (6.8 million people) are mothers and 44 percent (5.3 million people) are fathers. Mothers are slightly more likely than fathers to have started but not completed a college degree—21 percent of mothers hold some credit without a degree compared with 19 percent of fathers (Figure 4)—which tracks with trends showing that women overall are more likely to enroll in college than men.⁴¹ As was noted in Figure 2, single mothers in particular are more likely to have earned some college credit but no degree (27 percent) compared with single fathers and single women without children (23 percent and 21 percent, respectively).

On average, parents ages 25 to 64 with some college credit but no degree have two children under age 18 in their households, with little variation by gender, marital status, or race/ethnicity. The median age of all parents with some college but no degree is 39 years old: 32 percent of these parents are ages 25 to 34, 41 percent are ages 35 to 44, 23 percent are ages 45 to 54, and four percent are ages 55 to 64.

Latinx Parents are the Least Likely to Hold Postsecondary Degrees and Are Among the Least Likely to Hold Some College Credit but No Degree

As among Latinx adults overall, Latinx parents are the least likely to hold college degrees and among the least likely to have started, but not completed, a degree program compared with parents of other races and ethnicities.⁴² Nearly a quarter (23 percent or 3.0 million people) of Latinx parents hold a college degree and 18 percent (2.4 million people) hold some credit but have not completed a degree program. Combined, this accounts for more than two in five (42 percent) of all Latinx parents. These rates suggest a relatively greater likelihood of completion if a degree program is started, but also that a substantial set of obstacles exist to beginning a degree program in the first place.

Latinx adults with some college credit but no degree are also more likely to be parents compared with adults overall with the same level of education (42 percent compared with 35 percent), and they are more likely to be parents of young children under six than parents with some college credit but no degree overall (19 percent compared with 14 percent). Though more research is needed to understand these trends, the higher likelihood that Latinx adults are parents, and parents of young children, could contribute to their ability and willingness to (re)enroll in college, given the general lack of support

The higher likelihood that Latinx adults are parents and parents of young children could contribute to their ability and willingness to (re) enroll in college, given the lack of support for parenting college students on college campuses.

for parenting college students on college campuses. Improved access to affordable and high-quality care options for infants and toddlers, including both center- and home-based care, for example, could play a meaningful role in enabling more Latinx parents to consider college enrollment.

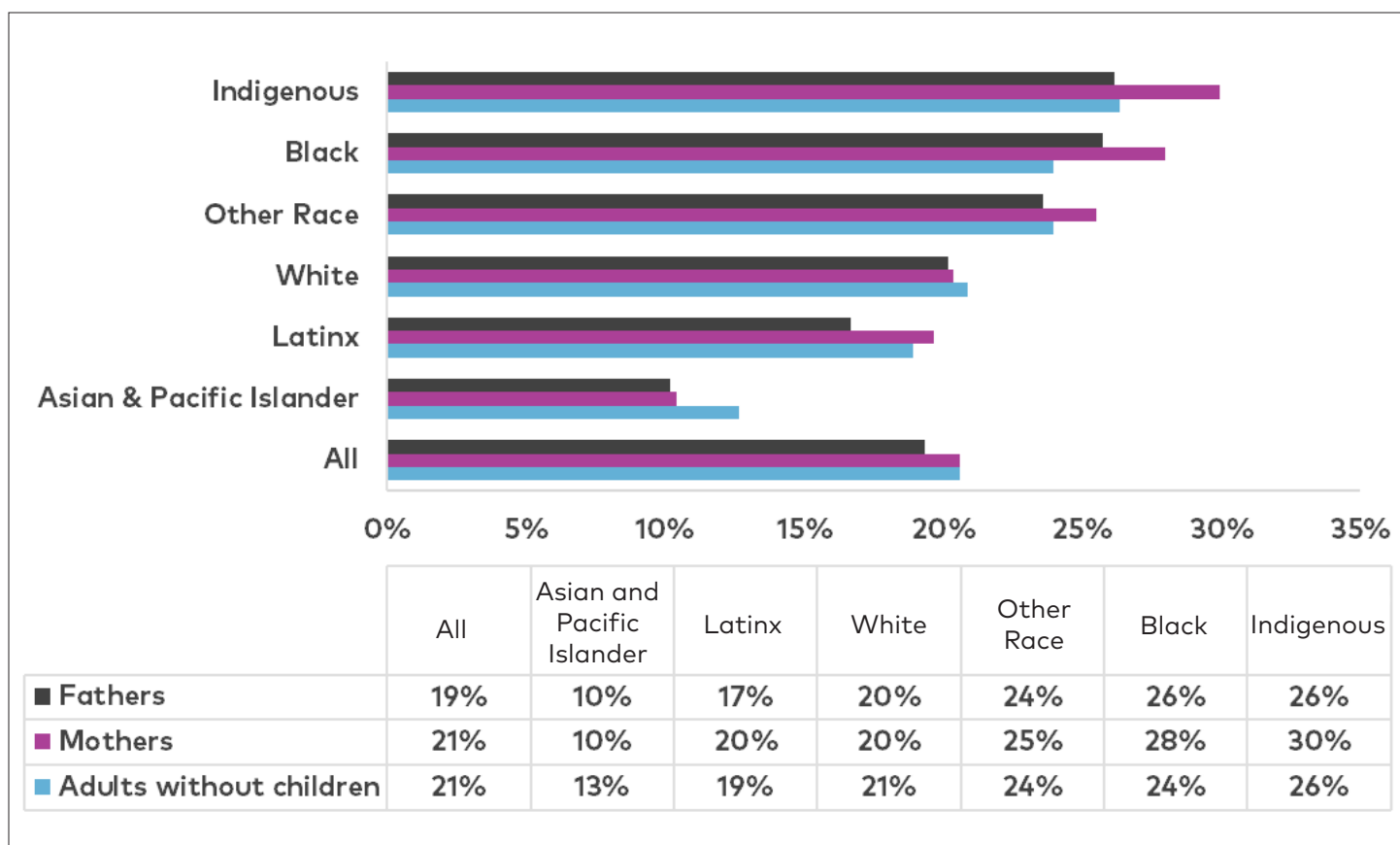
Indigenous and Black Parents—Especially Mothers—Are the Most Likely to Have Started College, but Not Completed a Degree

In addition to being less likely to report having a college degree, Indigenous and Black parents are more likely to report having some college credit but no degree compared with their counterparts of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Figure 4). Twenty-eight percent of Indigenous parents and 27 percent of Black parents report having earned some credit but not a degree, compared with 26 percent and 24 percent of their respective counterparts who are without children under 18 in the household, and 20 percent of parents overall. This trend is particularly pronounced among Black and Indigenous mothers, who are more likely than their male counterparts as well as men and women with and without children of other racial/ethnic backgrounds to have started, but not completed, postsecondary educational programs (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Indigenous and Black Parents—Especially Mothers—Are More Likely to Have Earned Some College Credit but No Degree

Compared to Their Counterparts of Other Races/Ethnicities

Share of Adults Aged 25–64 with Some College Credit but No Degree by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Parental Status, 2017–2019



Notes: “Fathers” and “mothers” refer to men and women who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. “Adults without children” refers to adults without children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. Postsecondary degrees include associate degrees, bachelor’s degrees, and graduate degrees. Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A. When combined with other educational attainment levels, totals may not sum to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

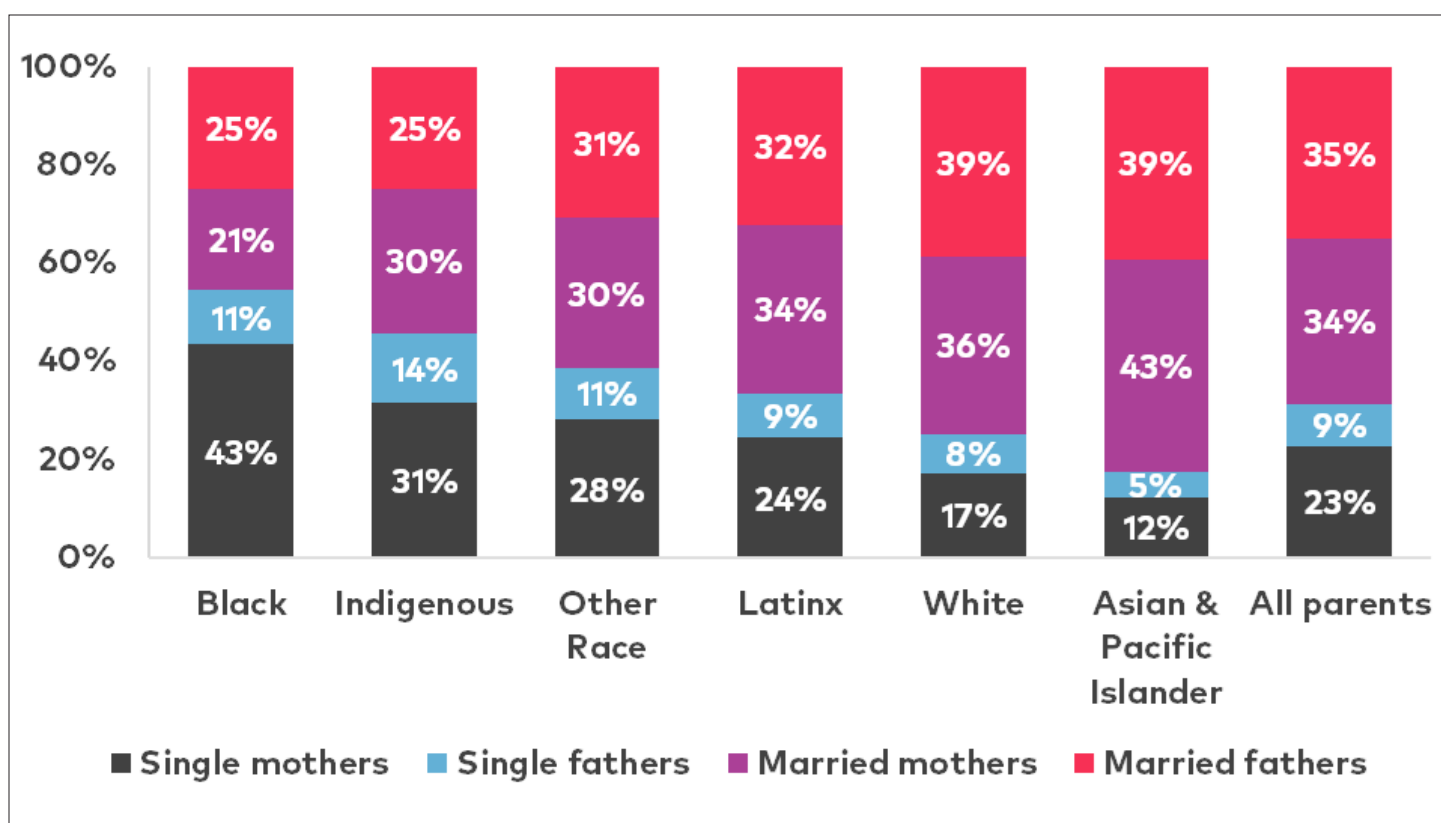
Black and Indigenous Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree Are More Likely to Be Single Parents

Slightly fewer than one in three parents with some college credit but no degree overall (31 percent or 3.8 million people) are single parents, and most of these single parents (72 percent or 2.8 million) are single mothers (Figure 5). As among Black and Indigenous parents overall, Black and Indigenous parents with some college credit but no degree are more likely to be single parents (55 percent and 46 percent) compared with other parents with the same level of educational attainment (Figure 5).

Only 30 percent of Black single mothers and 23 percent of Indigenous single mothers hold degrees as of 2019, compared with 51 percent and 37 percent of their married counterparts (see Table B2). In contrast, while 43 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander parents with some college but no degree are married mothers (Figure 5), Asian and Pacific Islander married mothers are much more likely to have completed a degree than married mothers overall (71 percent compared with 57 percent; Table B2).

FIGURE 5. Most Single Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree Are Single Mothers
And Single Motherhood is Particularly Common Among Black Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree

Shares of Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree by Race/Ethnicity, Marital Status, and Gender, 2017–2019



Notes: "Fathers" and "mothers" refer to men and women who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. "Adults without children" refers to adults without children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A. Combined values may vary due to rounding; for example, 31 percent of all parents are single (rounding down) while 23 percent are single mothers and 9 percent are single fathers (rounding up).

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

Even though rates of single parenthood for adults by race and ethnicity generally reflect broader demographic trends regardless of educational attainment, they have important implications for the types of support necessary to promote success among Black and Indigenous parents overall, and single mothers in particular, who want to finish college degrees. Providing adequate support—including support for caregiving and financial needs—

for Black and Indigenous parents, especially those who are single, is essential to their ability to return to college. Doing so would create stronger pathways that would more effectively lead to improved family economic security and mobility among the most marginalized communities.⁴³

Providing adequate caregiving and financial support for Black and Indigenous parents, especially single mothers, is essential to their ability to return to college and finish their degrees.

Most Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree Are Not Currently Enrolled in a Degree Program

While the data used for this analysis are limited in their ability to describe ongoing college enrollment among U.S. adults, they do suggest that the majority of parents who hold some college credit but no degree are not currently working to earn one. Data from the ACS provide information on whether a respondent “attended school or college” during the three months preceding the survey. While this “yes” or “no” response does not capture the nature of the program being pursued, or the number of classes or credits most recently attempted or completed, we assume for the purposes of this analysis that those who respond “yes” are currently enrolled in a degree-seeking program at least part time. Based on this assumption, only nine percent of parents with some college credit (1.1 million people) report having recently attended school or college. Adults without children in the household are similarly unlikely to report being enrolled in a degree-seeking program (seven percent or 1.7 million people).

Among the population of parents who started, but have not completed, a degree, mothers are more likely to report having taken classes within the last three months than fathers or women without children in the household (11 percent compared with six percent and seven percent, respectively). Overall, there are approximately 11.1 million parents—6.1 million mothers and 5.0 million fathers—with some college credit but no degree who have not attended school or college within the last three months.

Most Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree Hold More than One Year’s Worth of College Credit

As mentioned above, ACS data similarly do not fully identify the number or type of credits earned by currently enrolled adults, though they do distinguish between less than one year and at least one year’s worth of college credit. This information can be used as a proxy for individuals who are relatively more likely to complete degrees than their counterparts. A 2019 report by the National Student Clearinghouse highlights how both reenrollment and subsequent completion rates among adults with some college credit but no degree increase relative to the amount of prior credit held.⁴⁴ Looking at five-year outcomes for a national cohort of roughly 29 million individuals who had earned some college credit but no degree or certificate as of the end of 2013, the study finds that adults with at least two years’ worth of college credits demonstrate the greatest likelihood of both reenrolling and completing.

Nearly a quarter (24 percent) of adults with at least two years' worth of college credit were observed to reenroll; 33 percent of these completed their degree programs. Parents with some college credit but no degree who report having already earned at least one year of college credit therefore may have greater prospective likelihoods for future (re)enrollment and attainment.

IWPR's analysis finds that nearly two thirds (65 percent) of parents who hold some college credit have earned at least one year or more of college credit and are not currently enrolled in school or college (a similar rate to unenrolled adults with some college credit overall, at 64 percent). This relative likelihood of not being enrolled while also holding at least one year's worth of college credit is observed similarly across racial and ethnic groups and for both fathers and mothers within each group: 65 percent of Black mothers, 63 percent of Latina mothers, 69 percent of Black fathers, and 66 percent of Latino fathers with some college credit but no degree have at least one year's worth of credit and are not enrolled.

To frame it a different way, most unenrolled parents with some college credit but no degree (71 percent or 7.9 million parents) also report having earned at least one full year's worth of college credit, a slightly higher rate than among unenrolled adults with some college credit but no degree without children in their households (69 percent).

III. THE EFFECT OF PARENTAL DEGREE COMPLETION ON NATIONAL ATTAINMENT GOALS

To get a better sense of the importance of reengaging unenrolled parents who have not earned a degree in reaching broader degree attainment goals, IWPR examined hypothetical outcomes under two sets of attainment scenarios. These scenarios are based on observed trends in attainment rates and demographics, including annual percentage increases in recent years. They illustrate what reengaging unenrolled parents with some college credit but no degree might mean for different subpopulations—such as by race, ethnicity, marital status, and gender—in addition to the national attainment rate for adults aged 25 to 64 overall.

Collectively, the evidence produced in these scenarios demonstrates the importance of parents with some college credit but no degree to achieving a national 60 percent degree attainment rate among adults overall. It also illustrates ways in which disparities in degree attainment by race, ethnicity, marital status, and gender may be narrowed by intentionally providing supportive pathways to attainment for parents. Ultimately, if the level of attainment necessary to meeting critical state and national economic demands is not possible with only current and prospective students without children, who face relatively fewer obstacles to college entry and completion than students who do have children, designing interventions to strategically address the needs of parents will be an essential component to any future successful goal attainment.

The United States Will Not Reach 60 Percent Attainment Without Reengaging Unenrolled Parents with Some College Credit

Under the first scenario, IWPR's analysis finds that it is very unlikely that the country will reach its goal attainment rate without taking steps to promote reengagement and completion among parents with some college credit but no degree. The following section describes a set of assumptions using 2017 to 2019 ACS data to demonstrate the role of parents in reaching a 60 percent goal attainment rate and to underscore the importance of considering this population in plans to boost college completion among adults overall.

1. We begin with the baseline estimate of degree attainment for adults ages 25 to 64 overall. We then assume that all adults (both parents and adults without children) who report current enrollment in a college program complete their degrees. Assuming 100 percent completion among all *currently enrolled* adults illustrates the maximum potential gains with respect to degree attainment among this population.
2. We then assume that 100 percent of *unenrolled* adults without children who have earned at least one year or more of college credit reenroll and complete degrees. Given the evidence presented in the 2019 National Student Clearinghouse study, which finds that adults with more earned credit (at least two years) are more likely to return to

college and graduate, we do not include unenrolled adults with less than one year of college credit in this assumption.⁴⁵ Taken in conjunction with the first assumption that all currently enrolled adults (including currently enrolled parents) go on to graduate, this illustrates the maximum potential gains in attainment rates before including unenrolled parents with some college credit but no degree.

3. Finally, we look at the relative contribution of a situation in which all unenrolled parents who have earned at least one year of college credit reenroll and complete degrees toward a 60 percent attainment target. This illustrates the maximum potential gains from taking unenrolled parents into account, recognizing that they especially may require additional support to reenroll and successfully complete degrees.

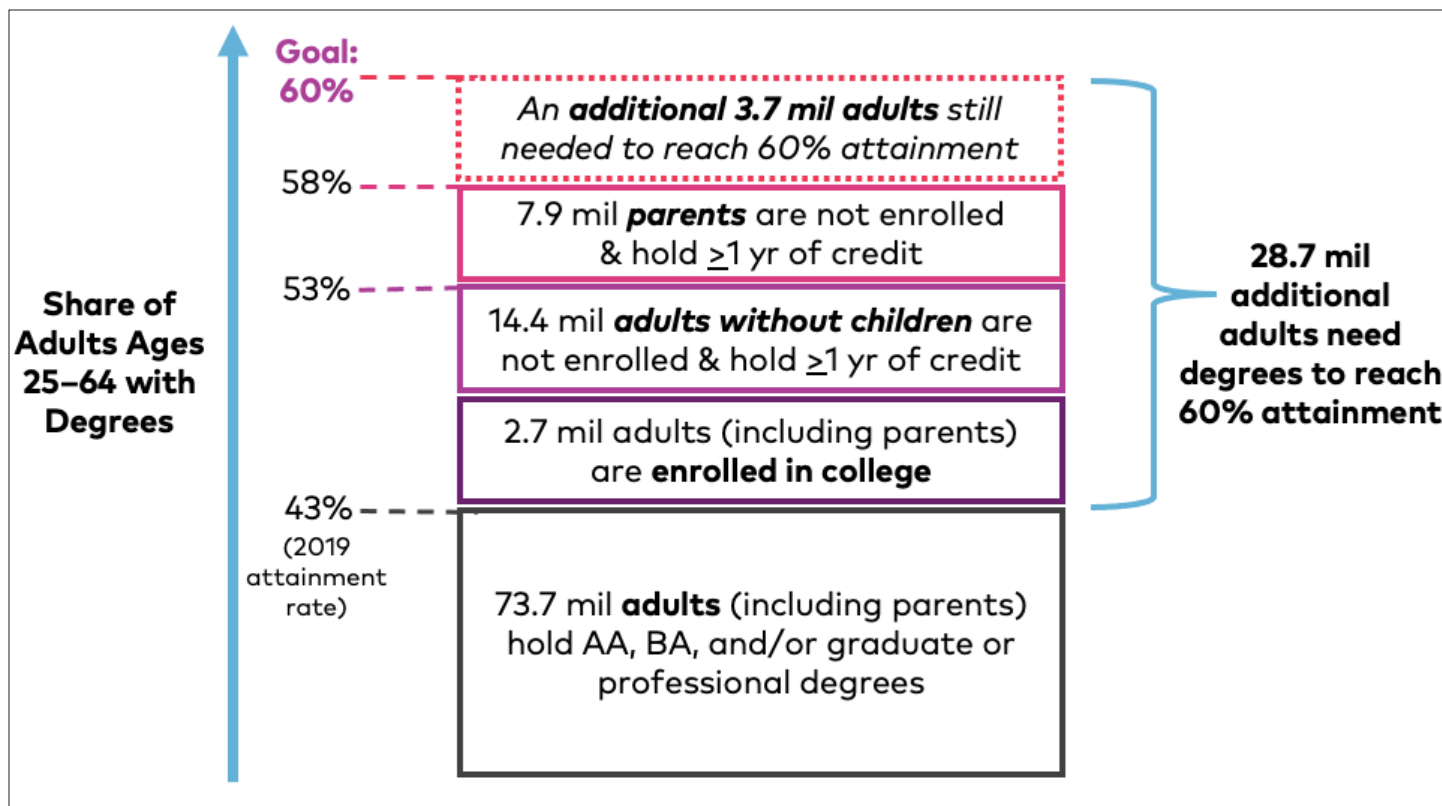
Under these assumptions, given current degree attainment rates and holding all other things constant, even if all 2.7 million enrolled adults, regardless of parent status, and all 14.4 million unenrolled adults without children who hold at least a year of college credit as of 2019 go on to graduate, the United States still would not achieve its goal of 60 percent attainment among adults overall—combined, they would only account for roughly 60 percent of the current attainment gap of 28.7 million adults overall (Figure 6; see Table B3 for additional details). An additional 11.6 million adults still would need to earn degrees to close that gap and reach 60 percent attainment overall.

Even if all enrolled adults and all adults without children who hold at least a year of college credit go on to graduate, the United States still would not achieve its goal of 60 percent attainment among adults overall.

Degree attainment among the 7.9 million unenrolled parents with at least one year's worth of credit could very nearly close the degree attainment gap overall.

Degree attainment among the 7.9 million unenrolled parents with at least one year's worth of credit could also reduce the overall postsecondary attainment gap substantially—by an additional 27 percent—very nearly closing the attainment gap among adults overall (Figure 6). If all enrolled adults, all adults without children and with at least one year of college credit, and all parents with at least one year of credit were to graduate, the overall degree attainment rate would rise to 58 percent.

FIGURE 6. Degree Attainment among Adults Ages 25–64 if Parents with Some College Credit Were to Complete Degrees



Note: Not to scale. "Parents" refers to adults ages 25–64 with children under age 18 in their household.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

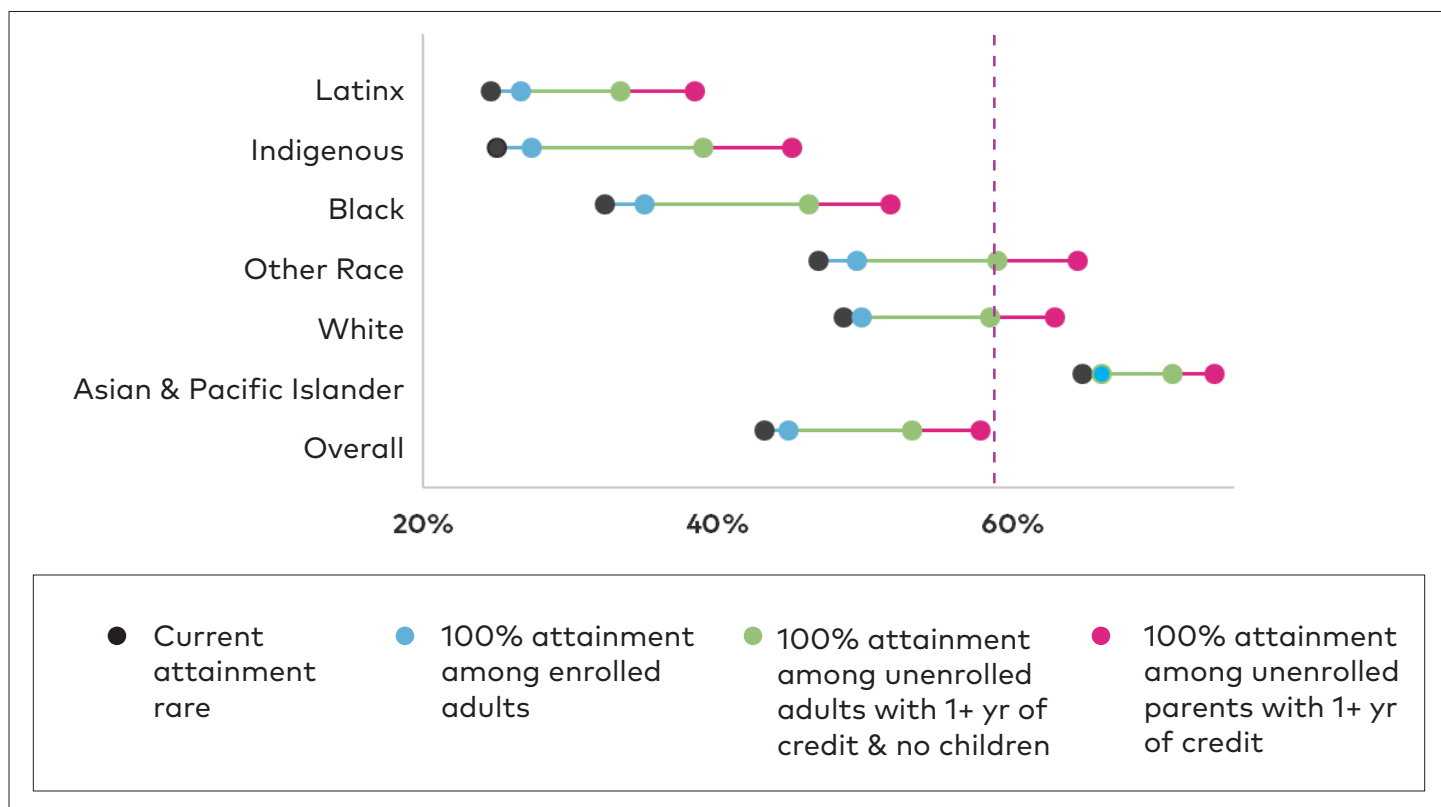
In this most optimistic scenario, racialized opportunity gaps would still exist but would be reduced (Figure 7). For example, degree attainment among the 1.5 million Latinx parents, 0.7 million Indigenous parents, and 1.2 million Black parents with at least one year of college credit while currently unenrolled would increase the adult attainment rates for these groups by 21 percent, 24 percent, and 17 percent respectively compared with 9 percent for their White counterparts. Furthermore, the overall parental degree attainment rate would reach 60 percent, with White parents and parents identifying as "other race" exceeding the 60 percent target (68 percent and 63 percent).

These scenarios underscore the imperative to think inclusively about the population of prospective college students, which is necessary for the country's economic recovery and health.

FIGURE 7. Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree Are Essential for Progress

To Achieve the Overall Attainment Goals and Reduce Gaps by Race/Ethnicity

Degree Attainment Rates among Adults Aged 25–64 by Race/Ethnicity if Adults with Some College Credit Were to Complete Degrees, 2017–2019



Note: Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

Although these scenarios assuming 100 percent return and completion among those with some college credit but no degree are highly unlikely, they underscore the imperative to think inclusively about the population of prospective college students, which is necessary to the country's economic recovery and health relative to its production of a skilled workforce. Given evidence described in this report about the remaining gap in degree attainment when just focusing on students without children, implementing policies and practices which promote attainment for adults who are parents is essential.⁴⁶

When Might 60 Percent Degree Attainment Be Achieved?

In the second set of scenarios, we consider what future attainment might look like among adults aged 25 to 64 assuming recent trends in annual increases in attainment persist. These projections illustrate the current trajectory and anticipated timeframes for reaching the 60 percent attainment target for different subgroups. We contrast these projections with those of a related scenario in which all high school students enroll in, and graduate from, a college degree program between 2020 and 2025 to see whether a 60 percent attainment rate may

be achieved by 2025 without reengaging unenrolled parents or adults with some college credit but no degree.

Existing literature shows that the United States will not achieve 60 percent degree attainment among adults aged 25 to 64 by the goal year of 2025 based on current conditions and trajectories.⁴⁷ IWPR estimates suggest a similar conclusion: assuming recent trends in educational attainment and demographics persist, only 48 percent of the adult population will have an associate, bachelor's, or graduate degree by 2025 (refer to Appendix C for a fuller discussion of the methodology). This 2025 attainment rate roughly aligns with the baseline attainment estimations provided by a 2020 Ithaca S+R study, which projects a 54 percent attainment rate in 2025; IWPR's estimate is slightly lower in part because Ithaca S+R's analysis includes certificates in its attainment rate measure in addition to degrees, whereas this analysis focuses on college degrees exclusively.⁴⁸

At the present trajectory, it will take until 2041 to reach 60 percent degree attainment among all adults aged 25–64.

Based on a projected 48 percent degree attainment rate in 2025, an additional 23.5 million adults would need to complete a degree to reach the 60 percent goal for adults aged 25 to 64.⁴⁹ Currently, there are an estimated 22.3 million unenrolled adults with at least one year's worth of college credit but no degree—7.9 million of whom are parents. All these adults with some college credit but no degree, including many parents and an increased share of students enrolling in college immediately following high school, would need to complete degrees to cover this remaining gap. Otherwise, at the present trajectory and without reengaging adults and parents who left college

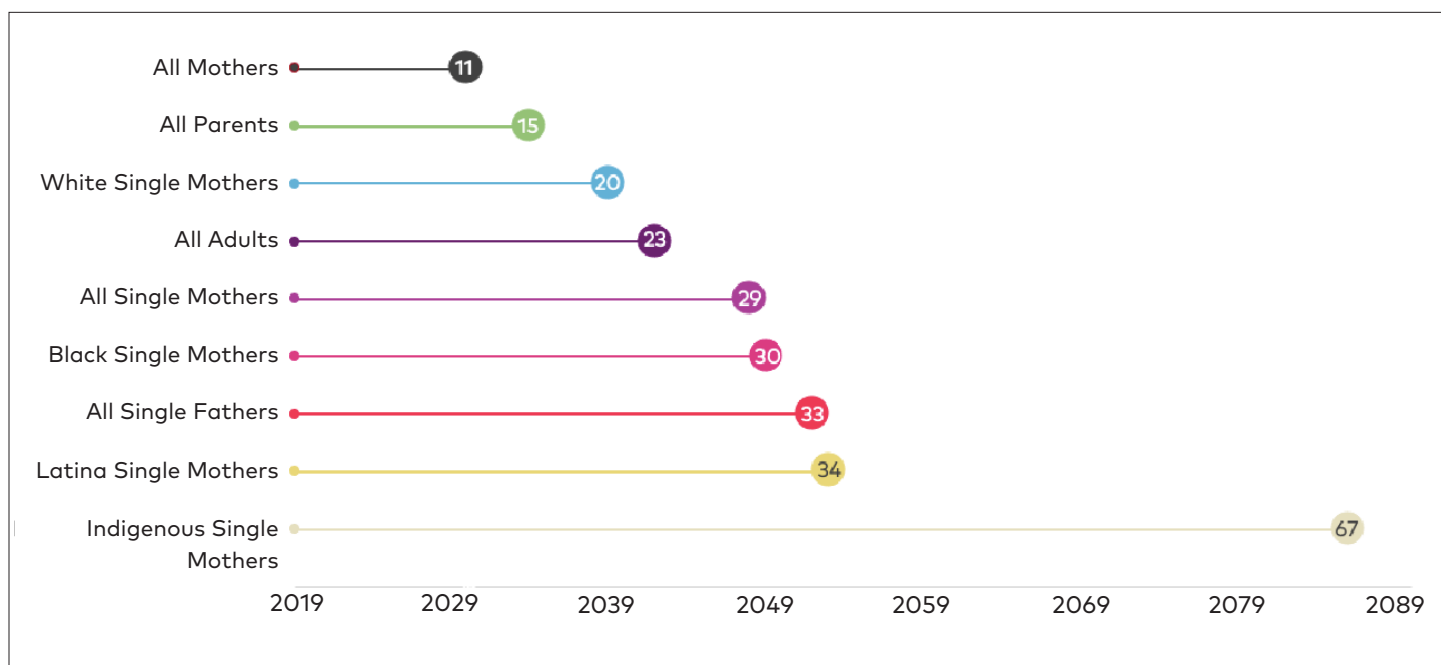
before graduating, it will take until 2042 to reach 60 percent degree attainment among all adults aged 25 to 64, not including certificates (Figure 8).

Projected degree attainment rates and corresponding time horizons also vary substantially by parental status, marital status, gender, and race/ethnicity, as driven by disparities in attainment (Figure 8; see also Appendix C). For instance, based on the stated assumptions, it will take until 2034 for parents overall to reach 60 percent degree attainment compared with 2049 for adults without children. Mothers, however, will reach 60 percent attainment slightly sooner than fathers: 2030 compared with 2038.

FIGURE 8. It Will Take Indigenous Single Mothers More than Twice as Long as All Single Mothers to Reach 60 Percent Attainment

Based on Recent Trends

Number of Years from 2019 to Reach 60 Percent Degree Attainment for Selected Parent Subpopulations, Ages 25–64



Note: The horizontal axis presents a timeline, with the number of years from 2019 highlighted in the corresponding circle ending each line. "Fathers" and "mothers" refer to men and women who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. "Single" includes those who responded as either separated, widowed, divorced, or never married. Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

The shortened time horizons observed for parents and mothers overall, however, are driven by attainment rates among married parents. While nearly three quarters (72 percent) of parents overall are expected to hold a degree by 2042, the year all adults overall (parents and adults without children combined) are expected to reach 60 percent attainment at the current trajectory, it will take much longer for single parents to reach the 60 percent benchmark, especially when taking race and ethnicity into consideration. Compared with parents overall, who will achieve 60 percent attainment by 2034, single mothers will require an additional 14 years (2048), and single fathers an additional 18 years (2052), to reach 60 percent attainment (Figure 8; see also Appendix C).

Independent of current attainment rates, the time expected to reach 60 percent attainment varies further due to differences in annual percentage increases in degree attainment. For instance, even though Latina single mothers have among the lowest estimated 2019-degree attainment rate, they are expected to reach 60 percent attainment by 2053. This is contrasted with Indigenous single mothers, who demonstrate a slightly higher degree attainment rate than Latina single mothers in 2019 (23 percent compared with 19 percent based on the five-year ACS estimates used for these projections) but who are not expected

to reach 60 percent attainment until 2086 due to a lower annual percentage increase as averaged from 2014 to 2019. As others have noted, additional data collection and research is needed to understand these trends and how to create more inclusive pathways for Indigenous students overall.⁵⁰

The above projections can be construed as lower-bound estimates with respect to anticipated attainment rates, given that they do not consider any policy implementations which may increase college enrollment and/or completion rates among the prospective student population at large. Any increase in enrollment and completion rates would increase progress towards a 60 percent attainment goal more quickly, shortening this projected time horizon for adults overall.

But even under the most optimistic of scenarios in which all high school students were to complete a college degree between 2020 and 2025, an additional 12.7 million adults still would need to complete a college degree to reach the goal assuming no other changes in completion rates among adult learners (Appendix C). Currently, there are 2.7 million adults with some college credit but no degree who are also enrolled; assuming they complete their degrees, this still leaves a gap of roughly 10.0 million adults. Slightly less than half of the 22.3 million adults with at least one year's worth of credit and who are not currently enrolled would be needed to close that gap, of whom 7.9 million (35 percent) are parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Education beyond high school is widely linked to the nation's ability to strengthen the workforce, grow the economy, and enhance families' abilities to gain and sustain economic security, making postsecondary attainment integral to future U.S. social progress. This brief adds to prior research on the need to focus on parenting status and the role of caregiving in educational attainment by demonstrating how reengaging parents with their degree programs is integral to achieving broader national and statewide attainment goals. Below, we provide recommendations for promoting attainment and equity among parents with some college credit.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

At the federal level, policymakers should specifically acknowledge and build strategic policy and programmatic infrastructure, with appropriate financing, that benefits student groups facing obstacles to degree attainment—including parents with low incomes, single mothers, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous adults—and creates sustainable onramps to college enrollment and completion. Any effort to improve attainment outcomes must also intentionally address the nation's history of discrimination and marginalization by taking accountability for equity and pursuing policy reform that actively works to further racial progress in access to and completion of quality postsecondary opportunities. In addition to the range of policy reforms needed to make higher education more accessible and to increase equity in outcomes for student parents and other marginalized student groups, federal policymakers should:⁵¹

- Set a numerical goal with interim benchmarks for the share of U.S. adults who need to hold postsecondary credentials to achieve the social and economic goals it has set out to achieve. The goal should include specific national targets for increasing equity in racial, ethnic, and parental degree attainment.
- Enact an explicit policy agenda, with appropriate levels of funding, that will facilitate progress toward numerical attainment targets for parents, single parents, and Black, Latinx, and Indigenous adults who do not currently hold college credentials. This agenda should include:
 - Investments in evidence-based practices that promote enrollment, persistence, and completion among parenting students and students of color, such as access to affordable, on-campus child care;⁵²
 - The cancellation of all or a substantial portion of student loan debt, which would particularly benefit parents, especially single parents, Black parents and students without children, and other adults with some college credit who are more likely to experience student loan default, which can delay or derail their plans to return to college;⁵³ and,

- The establishment of a universal tuition- and fee-free community college program, which is accessible by all prospective students and provides supportive services that are integral for parenting students' reengagement and success.⁵⁴
- Direct the U.S. Department of Education to encourage or require states and institutions receiving federal funds to report on the number and demographics of students with children, as well as their educational outcomes, on an annual basis. This would include providing technical assistance to states and institutions for initiating new data collection on parenting students.
- Work with Congress to substantially increase investment in broadly accessible and affordable child care and early learning programs, as well as the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grant program. Increasing CCAMPIS funding to \$500 million would build its capacity to meet the child care needs of student parents with low incomes, given that the current funding level only serves less than one percent of the estimated need and the current inaccessibility of community-based child care.⁵⁵
- Instruct federal agencies, including the U.S. departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Labor, Agriculture, and Housing, to find new ways to collaborate to better serve families in which parents desire a postsecondary education as a route to family economic security—through existing programs, such as the Pell Grant program, Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education & Training (SNAP E&T), and the creation of new ones with dedicated funding and opportunities for federal-state partnership.

Recommendations for State and Institutional Leaders

States and institutions also have a critical role to play in building supportive pathways to college reengagement and completion among parents and other adults with some college credit, as well as removing barriers to their progress that stem from systemic racial injustice. Given that most states have set explicit attainment goals, it is essential to ensure that student parents and the intersection between parenting and racial equity are acknowledged and built into strategic plans for meeting such goals. Specifically:

- States should set specific attainment goals related to parental attainment, as a subset of broader state and national targets, including those focused on increasing racial equity. States without any attainment goal, or without any explicit goal related to race equity, should set them, and include targets for parents. Progress toward parental attainment targets should be reported on publicly on an ongoing basis.
- To facilitate progress towards reaching attainment goals, states should initiate and invest in—ideally in conjunction with efforts and funding at the federal level and complementary institutional efforts—the implementation of practices and policies that hold promise for promoting completion among parenting students, especially

Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and single parents, such as

- Improving the infrastructure of affordable, high-quality child care available to parents enrolled in education and training;
 - Including student parents—first time-enrolled and returning students—in statewide college promise, or “free college,” programs;⁵⁶ and
 - Increasing need-based financial aid for tuition and non-tuition assistance, including emergency aid, information on the dependent care allowance, and financial assistance for basic needs like housing and transportation.
- State higher education systems should gather data from institutions on the demographic characteristics and educational outcomes of students who are parents of dependent children, and aiding institutions to enable them to collect these data. State systems and institutions should report these data publicly on a regular basis, with appropriate disaggregation by race/ethnicity, marital status, gender, and income, to build transparency around existing inequities in need of strategic action.
 - States and institutions—as well as, or in collaboration with, researchers and advocates—should use data on the student parent population and their educational outcomes to understand the implications of parent status, race/ethnicity, and gender for enrollment and attainment outcomes and to design policy and practice interventions that address existing gaps and boost completion.
 - Institutions should develop campus-level strategies to reengage parents that hold prior credits, as well as support currently enrolled students with children, through:
 - Intentional recruitment of prospective student parents to postsecondary opportunities;
 - Forgiveness of small institutional debts that can act as roadblocks to reenrollment;
 - Training of campus staff to provide hands-on navigation support to parents once enrolled; and
 - Creation of family-friendly policies and physical spaces on campuses.⁵⁷

APPENDIX A. DATA & METHODOLOGY

Characterizing Parents with Some College Credit but No Degree

Pooling three single-year data files (2017, 2018, and 2019) ensures sufficient sample sizes to be able to provide comment on relatively small subpopulations, such as single mothers with some college credit but no degree by race/ethnicity, while also preserving currency of reporting. Weights are applied when generating estimates to represent a single year's worth of observations for 2019. Respondents were able to provide numerous responses when asked about the highest level of education completed; the table below details how the full list of possible response options with respect to highest education attained as collected by the ACS have been combined for this analysis.

Table A1. ACS Education Responses and Corresponding Educational Attainment Designation

Educational Attainment	ACS Education Response
Less than high school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No schooling completed Kindergarten Grade 1 through 11 (specified) 12th grade – no diploma
High school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular high school diploma GED or alternative credential
Some college	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some college credit, but less than 1 year of college credit 1 or more years of college credit, no degree
Associate degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Associate degree (e.g., AA, AS)
Bachelor's degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)
Graduate degree	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA) Professional degree beyond a bachelor's degree (e.g., MD, DVM, LLB, JD) Doctorate degree (e.g., PhD, EdD)

Note: Respondents are asked "what is the highest degree or level of school this person has completed" and can provide only one response. The preceding question asks whether "at any time in the last 3 months, has this person attended school or college" and provides space to specify whether it was public or private as well as the most recent level attended following similar response options as listed above.

Treatment of Non-Degree Credentials

Many postsecondary attainment goals, including the one set by the Lumina Foundation, also include other non-degree credentials when calculating the postsecondary attainment rate among adults aged 25 to 64.⁵⁸ These non-degree certificates and licenses, such as those required for real estate professions, comprise additional educational attainment beyond high school that is distinct from an associate or bachelor's degree. National-level data on attainment of these credentials are sparse, however, and evaluation of their quality and relative return, particularly for parents and families, poses a considerable methodological challenge. No additional specification is given for any non-degree certificates or credentials earned in the ACS data, and so non-degree credential attainment is not included in this analysis. As others have noted, additional research is needed in this area to measure the effects of increasing these credentials on workforce composition, individual earnings, likelihood of employment, and economic security, particularly by race/ethnicity in addition to gender and parental status.⁵⁹

Racial and Ethnic Classifications and Within-Group Differences

Racial and ethnic categories in this report are based on ACS response classifications, and aggregate subpopulations to be able to comment on national-level patterns and trends. "Latinx" includes Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Hispanic. "Indigenous" refers to Indigenous peoples of North America and includes American Indian and Alaskan Native. "Black" includes Black or African American. "Other race" includes other race, two major races, and three or more major races. "Asian and Pacific Islander" includes Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian/Pacific Islander.

Separate postsecondary education data and literature demonstrate how subpopulations within broad racial and ethnic groups have varied experiences in higher education and differential levels of educational attainment.⁶⁰ For instance, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data from 2018 highlight how South American adults ages 25 and older, such as adults identifying as Venezuelan or Chilean, demonstrate notably higher rates of degree attainment than other Latinx subpopulations, such as those identifying as Honduran or Guatemalan, while Pacific Islanders demonstrate markedly lower levels of postsecondary attainment compared with other Asian subpopulations, such as adults who identify as Korean or Japanese.⁶¹

These variations in educational experiences among subgroups are important to note as they have implications for designing policy to reduce barriers to college enrollment and completion, and to increase access and success for marginalized student subgroups. Given that this report emphasizes broad implications of attainment trends among parents by race and ethnicity for national postsecondary attainment goal achievement and is intended to align with existing literature focused on similar topics, the analysis relies on broader racial and ethnic categories rather than on trends among subgroups.⁶²

APPENDIX B. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT DATA TABLES

Table B1. Number of Adults Aged 25–64 by Educational Attainment, Race/Ethnicity, and Share Who Are Parents of Children Under 18, 2017–2019

	Asian and Pacific Islander		Black		Indigenous		Latinx		Other Race		White		All adults	
	Count	% Parents	Count	% Parents	Count	% Parents	Count	% Parents	Count	% Parents	Count	% Parents	Count	% Parents
Less than high school	1,048,491	35%	2,390,847	23%	169,574	28%	8,362,030	46%	268,621	34%	6,011,613	26%	18,251,176	36%
High school graduate	1,529,969	36%	6,762,075	27%	375,163	30%	8,572,592	43%	753,304	34%	25,972,070	27%	43,965,173	30%
Some college credit, no degree	1,281,841	36%	5,348,523	34%	306,447	34%	5,560,427	42%	853,391	37%	21,477,034	33%	34,827,663	35%
Associate degree	741,001	39%	1,969,084	36%	110,889	35%	2,095,977	43%	349,262	38%	10,415,758	36%	15,681,971	37%
Bachelor's degree	3,485,655	40%	3,143,965	34%	117,504	37%	3,626,704	40%	825,838	36%	25,394,377	38%	36,594,043	38%
Graduate degree	2,863,909	48%	1,832,205	38%	56,148	36%	1,612,911	43%	476,804	40%	14,582,699	42%	21,424,676	42%
Total	10,950,866	40%	21,446,699	31%	1,135,725	32%	29,830,641	43%	3,527,220	36%	103,853,551	34%	170,744,702	36%

Note: Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A. “Parents” refers to adults with at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household regardless of marital status or gender; “adults without children” do not have children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household.
Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

Table B2. Share of Credit- And Degree-Holding Parents by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Marital Status, 2017–2019

	Some College Credit but No Degree					Postsecondary Degree Holders				
	Mothers		Fathers		All Adults without Children	Mothers		Fathers		All Adults without Children
	Single	Married	Single	Married		Single	Married	Single	Married	
Asian and Pacific Islander	20%	9%	21%	10%	13%	47%	71%	40%	71%	62%
Black	31%	23%	27%	25%	24%	30%	51%	22%	41%	30%
Indigenous	30%	30%	26%	26%	26%	23%	37%	15%	30%	24%
Latinx	22%	18%	18%	16%	19%	20%	29%	14%	22%	25%
Other Race	33%	21%	29%	22%	24%	35%	58%	26%	53%	46%
White	27%	18%	24%	20%	21%	39%	64%	29%	56%	45%
Overall	27%	18%	23%	19%	21%	32%	57%	24%	49%	41%

Notes: Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A. “Mothers” and “fathers” refer to women and men who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. Parents overall refers to adults with at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household regardless of marital status or gender; adults without children do not have children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. “Single” includes those who responded as either separated, widowed, divorced, or never married. “Married” includes only those who responded as being married at the time of the survey. “College degrees” is inclusive of associate degrees, bachelor’s degrees, and graduate or professional degrees.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

Table B3. 2019 Degree Attainment Rates and Additional Degree Holders Necessary to Reach 60 Percent Attainment Among U.S. Adults Aged 25–64

Race/ Ethnicity	Total Degree Holders (Count)	2019 Attainment Rate	Additional Degree Holders Needed to Reach 60% (Count)	Enrolled Adults with Some College Credit, No Degree (All)		Unenrolled Adults, No Children, and ≥1 Year of College Credit		Unenrolled Parents with ≥1 Year of College Credit	
				Count	Share of Additional Degree Holders	Count	Share of Additional Degree Holders	Count	Share of Additional Degree Holders
Asian and Pacific Islander	7,090,565	65%	N/A	142,748	N/A	526,214	N/A	312,329	N/A
Black	6,945,254	32%	5,922,766	571,457	10%	2,381,254	40%	1,189,795	20%
Indigenous	284,541	25%	396,894	26,575	7%	132,442	33%	68,256	17%
Latinx	7,335,592	25%	10,562,793	614,803	6%	2,009,218	19%	1,518,000	14%
Other Race	1,651,904	47%	464,428	92,328	20%	335,439	72%	191,494	41%
White	50,392,834	49%	11,919,297	1,283,455	11%	9,037,593	76%	4,574,680	38%
Total	73,700,690	43%	28,746,132	2,731,366	10%	14,422,160	50%	7,854,554	27%

Note: Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A. “Parents” refers to those who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. “Adults without children” refers to adults without children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. The value calculated for additional degree holders needed to reach 60 percent attainment is rounded up to the nearest integer. Shares of additional degree holders for Asian and Pacific Islander adults are listed as “N/A” since the adult attainment rate already exceeds the 60 percent target.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

APPENDIX C. ESTIMATING FUTURE ATTAINMENT RATES

Estimating Future Attainment Rates Based on Recent Trends

Projections of future attainment rates are estimated using the most recent five-year estimates available. First, estimates of attainment rates are produced using each of the five-year data files from 2014 to 2019 to ensure sufficient sample sizes for smaller subpopulations. Next, annual percentage increases in attainment rates are calculated for each subgroup by race/ethnicity, marital status, parental status, and gender as well as for the total population of adults. Annual percentage increases calculated during 2014 to 2019 are fairly consistent year over year, suggesting the average taken is indicative of current trends. An example of these calculations is included in Table 1.

Table C1. Annual Attainment Growth Rate Estimates, All Adults Aged 25–64, 2014–2019

	Percentage with Degrees						Percentage Change					
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2014–2015	2015–2016	2016–2017	2017–2018	2018–2019	Average 2014–2019
Parents	42%	43%	44%	45%	46%	46%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	1.85%
Adults without children	38%	38%	39%	39%	40%	40%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1.33%
Adults (overall)	39%	40%	41%	41%	42%	43%	1%	1%	2%	2%	2%	1.51%

Note: This table presents an excerpt to illustrate the way in which growth rates were estimated. This process was repeated for individual subpopulations as noted in the text. “Parents” refers to those who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. “Adults without children” refers to adults without children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. Degrees are inclusive of associate, bachelor’s, and graduate or professional degrees. Percentage with college degrees is estimated based on the pooled five-year data published that year. Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

To estimate future postsecondary attainment rates, the 2019 single year estimate is used as the baseline amount. The calculated six-year average growth rate is assumed to persist in subsequent years (see Table E1). Growth is compounded annually. Taking the annual growth rate of the share of the adult population with college degrees and applying it in this way implicitly accounts for changes in demographics and migration. That is, the resultant projections simply assume that the proportions of adults within each subpopulation continues to increase following the same trends at the same annual rate as they have been over the last six years, rates which are observed in the data to be relatively stable. This

methodology yields estimates for individual years (e.g., to project attainments in 2025) and to estimate the number of years necessary to reach 60 percent postsecondary attainment for all adults as well as by race/ethnicity, marital status, parental status, and gender.

One key limitation is that these projections are based on linear growth rates. Given that growth rates are observed to be relatively constant for all subgroups analyzed during 2014 to 2019, this is reasonable to do in the short run. However, the longer the time horizon, the less likely this pattern is to persist. Nevertheless, it provides a stark illustration of current trajectories in the absence of additional policy interventions or supports.

TABLE C2. Projected Degree Attainment of Adults Aged 25–64 by Marital Status, Gender, Parental Status, and Race/Ethnicity Based on 2014–2019 Trends

Race/ Ethnicity	Subpopulation	2019 Degree Attainment	Annual % Increase (avg. 2014- 2018)	Projected Degree Attainment in 2025	First Full Year with 60% Attainment
Asian and Pacific Islander	Single Mothers	47%	2%	52%	2035
	Single Fathers	40%	3%	46%	2036
	All parents	68%	1%	74%	N/A
	Adults without children	61%	1%	65%	N/A
Black	Single Mothers	29%	3%	33%	2049
	Single Fathers	21%	3%	25%	2053
	All parents	36%	2%	42%	2041
	Adults without children	30%	2%	34%	2049
Indigenous	Single Mothers	23%	1%	25%	2086
	Single Fathers	15%	2%	17%	2097
	All parents	28%	2%	30%	2070
	Adults without children	24%	1%	25%	2115
Latinx	Single Mothers	19%	3%	24%	2053
	Single Fathers	13%	5%	18%	2052
	All parents	23%	3%	28%	2049
	Adults without children	25%	3%	29%	2051
Other Race	Single Mothers	35%	1%	38%	2058
	Single Fathers	26%	2%	29%	2061
	All parents	47%	2%	53%	2031
	Adults without children	45%	2%	52%	2032
White	Single Mothers	39%	2%	44%	2039
	Single Fathers	29%	3%	34%	2046
	All parents	54%	2%	61%	2025
	Adults without children	44%	1%	48%	2043
Overall	Single Mothers	31%	2%	36%	2048
	Single Fathers	23%	3%	28%	2052
	All parents	46%	2%	52%	2034
	Adults without children	40%	1%	44%	2049
	All adults	43%	2%	47%	2042

Notes: Degrees are inclusive of associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, and graduate or professional degrees. Degree attainment for 2019 is based on the most recent five-year estimates from 2019. Racial/ethnic categories are based on ACS classifications and defined in Appendix A. "Single" includes those who responded as either separated, widowed, divorced, or never married. "Married" includes only those who responded as being married at the time of the survey. "Mothers" and "fathers" refer to women and men who report having at least one child of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. Adults without children do not have children of their own under the age of 18 residing in their household. First full year with 60 percent attainment is listed as N/A for those groups who have already reached 60 percent attainment as of 2019.

Source: IWPR analysis of American Community Survey data from Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Sophia Foster, Ronald Goeken, Jose Pacas, Megan Schouweiler and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 11.0 [dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2021.

Estimating Future Attainment Rates if All High School Students Graduated from College

A 2016 report by the Education Commission of the States forecasted a scenario on a state level in which all high school students were to enroll and graduate from college from 2016 through 2025, highlighting the case of Minnesota.⁶³ These estimates were generated using the modeling tool published by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) and Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), which relies on data published in 2017.⁶⁴

To update this scenario in which all high school students graduate from college for this report, estimates for future attainment rates in this report are generated using the 2019 five-year ACS data according to the following methodology:

1. Add six years to "age" the cohort to 2025 (e.g., someone who is 59 in 2019 is recoded to be 65 in 2025).
2. Those who are age 65 or older are excluded from the sample, since this analysis is focused on attainment rates among adults aged 25 to 64. This reduces the sample to 145 million adults.
3. Population growth is calculated as 0.47 percent annually based on the average annual change in the adult population year over year using the 2014-2019 five-year estimates. This is compounded annually over a time horizon of six years using a principal amount of 170 million adults aged 25 to 64 in 2019 to estimate the total adult population in 2025 (175 million).
4. The entirety of the difference (29 million adults) entering the sample is assumed to have graduated high school, enrolled in college, and subsequently graduated from college.
5. Adding these recent graduates (29 million) to the adults who already have associate degrees or higher (63 million) yields a total of 92 million adults with postsecondary degrees in 2025, or an overall attainment rate of 53 percent.

ENDNOTES

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